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Interviewee: Birane Thiame
Interviewer: Mark Naison
Date: April 13, 2010

Mark Naison (MN): Today, April 13th 2010, we're at the home of our senior interviewer & translator Kareema Zaroo and we're interviewing Birane Thiame who works in Finance and who is a very famous DJ in the city of New York who is originally from Sierra Leon—

Birane Thiame (BT)- Cote d'Ivoire

MN: I'm sorry—Cote d'Ivoire. We always begin by asking people to talk about their family and especially your family in Africa.

BT: Okay, my name is Birane and I'm from Cote d'Ivoire. My family is Africa- I have like a very diverse family. Cote d'Ivoire, Togo, Senegal, Ghana. So I have a large big family.

Kareema Zaroo (KZ): How come?

BT: My family is from Senegal originally. My step dad is from Togo and my aunt is from Ghana.

MN: Wow so what were the major African languages you spoke as a child.

BT: I spoke Baoule. I still speak Baoule.

MN: Baoule? How do you spell that?

BT: B-A-O-U-L-E

MN: and that's a language in Kofifi of the group of (inaudible)

BT: Of central of the coast of (inaudible). So I speak Baoule, Mina from Togo

MN: Mina, M-Y-N-A?

BT: Mina is M-I-N-A. I speak Wolof—

MN: Wolof from Senegal- that I know- that's familiar. You don't speak (inaudible) from Ghana.

KZ: There's so-- many over 300 million dialects in Ghana.

MN: But (inaudible) in New York is a big language that Ghanaians speak.

BT: But it's a mix of Baoule and (inaudible).

MN: Right. Now was your family Muslim or Christian?

BT: Both.

MN: Both? See that's a mother's side is—

BT: Mother's side is Christian; Father is Muslim

KZ: So how did that work for you?

BT: I adjusted both of them well to make everybody happy. So I went to the mass, I learned, I went to Catholic School I learned. My dad was (inaudible after that) But easy.

MN: Wow. And were your parents professional people there?

BT: Yes my mom was a banker. My dad worked for Air Afrik. It used to be Air Afrik—sorry but now Air Afrik is gone. An airline that's in--- everybody worked my family most people.

KZ: They were doing this from Abidjan?

MN: which is for the capital in Cote d'Ivoire. Now was Cote d'Ivoire stable when you growing up politically?

BT: Yes because we had one president until- since I was born.

MN: and is he still there?

BT: No he's gone. Now we have a second president—or third president that was dead now. So but it was stable before I left.

MN: And what about now?

BT: It depend on month. Some of it good some of it not stable. Like election month is not good.

KZ & BT: (engage in a crossover in French)

MN: Did you play sports growing up?

BT: Basketball

MN: Basketball! Not soccer?

BT: No

MN: You play basketball?

KZ: How come?

BT: because of basketball players.

MN: When you were playing basketball did you think this will take you to the US?

BT: No, just for fun.

MN: The major European language there is French?

BT: French.

MN: and what was business conducted in, lets say in your mother's bank?

BT: French.

MN: and what about school?

BT: I did French until 4th--- or up to 8th grade I did French, Spanish and English and after 10th grade no more English. I was doing math and music and computer.

MN: Now are schools free or do you have to pay to go to school in Cote d'Ivoire?

BT: They're free. But we do have private school for richer people that pay- but not that much. But its free, college is free.

KZ & BT: (crossover in French)

MN: Did you go to college in Cote d'Ivoire?

BT: Just three months. I came here because it was not stable so I came to college here.

MN: So you left to escape political instability? Did you say---

BT: Both and because my cousin and I were becoming too big in the head so they had to like separate us.

KZ: What do you mean?

BT: playing basketball, do music—people know us so they come too big in the head.

MN: girls all over the place. So the family wanted you to leave?

BT: Us. It was 6 of us. I came here, some went to France, some went to England some went to Ireland, one went to Russia.

MN: Wow. Now tell me about your first exposure to music. Was this early in your life?

BT: Yes. It was well where I'm from music and sport go together. We do sport there's music next to us. There's people playing drums and singing like a choir but no (inaudible) just repetition. And we play music or play sports. I was doing both.

MN: Now was this music you know a particular popular music of Cote d'Ivoire? Or what was it called in those days?

BT: Zoujolu

MN: How do you spell it?

BT: Z-O-u-J-O-L-U

MN: Zoujolu. Now what would it resemble? Would it resemble funk? High life? Is it very distinct?

BT: Zoujolu is a creation of people from the street. Its like joy music. You know there's no rules on what you say or what you play- its just what you play.

MN: Now what instruments other than drums?

BT: There's barrels.

MN: So its almost all percussion?

BT: Yes percussion. Pure percussion

MN: Pure percussion. So Zoujolu is pure percussion. Wow!

BT: Until 1993 when it was taken to the studio.

MN: So pure percussion with drums, bottles and whatever music. And then do you chant over it or sing over it?

BT: We sing over it, but the song I made it—you stop playing first and you just say what you have in your heart.

(crossover between ZK and BT)

MN: Could you give us a demonstration of it? Banging the table and---

BT: What kind of songs?

MN: I mean like—

BT: Its like—(musical demonstration)

MN: and then you sing over it or do poetry?

BT: No singing.

MN: Oh its singing!

BT: My poetry is not good. Its like freestyle basically. What if we stop playing lets say soccer, basketball, volleyball or handball—we have like six and seven drums and there's one leader we just follow it.

MN: You know this sounds like go-go in Washington. Its was sort of in between funk and hip hop with a lot of percussion and its fast and singing over it. Chuck Brown.

BT & KZ (crossover)

BT: That came from the street.

MN: So if I did Zoujolu on YouTube would stuff come up?

BT: Yeah. A whole bunch of stuff.

MN: Okay a whole bunch of stuff. Would this be good party music---do you ever use your Zoujolu stuff here?

BT: No but they want to hear it in the street.

BT & ZK: (crossover talk)

MN: Okay so its singing over percussion?

BT: Yes, its like whats the guy—BB King. Blues is just speaking from the heart.

MN: Okay so that was the same kind of message. Except instead of the guitars it's the drums.

BT: You can sing the same song twice?

MN: Now do you improvise your lyrics—do you make them?

BT: Yes

MN: So this is like hip-hop—improvisation.

BT: But it makes sense.

MN: It has to make sense. But you can't sing the same song twice. So the premium is being very creative. But you were not primarily a singer?

BT: Drummer.

ZK: You were a drummer and playing soccer at the same time?

BT: Basketball.

MN: Are there any pictures of you playing basketball?

BT: No I wasn't sexy then. I wasn't sexy then so I have no pictures.

MN: So what's interesting was that it fit very much into being a DJ that you were brought up upon percussion and beats. Now were people aware of hip hop in Cote d'Ivoire when you were growing up?

BT: Yeah. Every Saturday night at 5 o'clock was hip hop hour. From 5 to 7pm.

MN: On national TV?

BT: Yup.

MN: They have- a TV hip-hop show? And who was the host?

(Cross over)

MN: And is he still around? And he still runs the show?

BT: No he's old now. He's does politics now.

MN: So this is now- when you were growing up this was the 80's?

BT: I was born in 76.

MN: Oh 76? You're very young. You guys are young. So the hip-hop show was in the 80's? That's amazing. It was on national television. Were hip-hop shows on the radio?

BT: Nah.

MN: So it was the television?

BT: yeah it came on TV.

MN: and which American hip-hop artist made an impression on you first?

BT: Michael Jackson. The video of his- Thriller.

MN: So that was big. Michael Jackson and Thriller? Now when did you start thinking of yourself as a DJ?

BT: See I didn't think about. I went to a club back home and the DJ was my cousin and he had to go outside to do something and he said come and play and that's it.

MN: Cause that's the same story people tell in the Bronx. Somebody has to leave- the guy has to go to the bathroom or to take a smoke or smoke a joint or something. So how old were you the first time?

BT: I was 17. He said music is like playing drums. 1-2-3-4 I just play.

MN: Now did they use two turn tables?

BT: yes

MN: okay and mixer? So did you talk over the mixers when you DJ?

BT: No.

MN: It was straight mixing?

BT: For the first month, I didn't know what I was doing so I was just mixing?

KZ: & did you have—um Ill say it in French—the other DJ had (speaking in French with BT)

MN: Cassettes rather than—

BT: yes cassettes first so we needed to use it then to fast forward!

MN: When did you start using vinyl?

BT: When I came to the States.

MN: So you didn't grow up learning to scratch?

BT: I didn't learn scratch, I just scratch. I told me friend Patrick we didn't go to school to learn scratch. We just played and scratch.

MN: Now this new evolve in music Coupe- Decale? When did that start?

BT: It start in early 2000. It was early 2000 in France. I think I was about a week before it started—the people were dancing so the guy who started gave the name..most people don't know him his name as DJ Jacob. He was the one who named it

MN: Now how do you spell his name?

BT: Jacob. He was the one who gave the name Coupe Decale just mean stealing.

KZ: Coupe mean cut and Decale mean leave or move.

MN: so when you went to the United States to go to school, which college did you go to?

BT: York College

MN: York College in Queens.

KZ: So your parents sent you by yourself?

BT: Me & my brother.

MN: Did you have family living in New York.

BT: My uncle was a teacher at York College.

MN: And was he living in Queens?

BT: No he was living in Katilin Ave Brooklyn.

MN: I know. I live right near there. Now what did you think of New York when you arrive?

BT: Lord have mercy. I wanted to go back the next morning.

KZ: I wanted to go back the next morning. It was too fast and the food was bad.

MN: What did you eat?

BT: the first thing I ate was Chinese food. It was red stuff and fried stuff and it taste different.

MN: What were you used to eating?

BT: fresh food. Like chicken, fish and everything was fresh and it was tasty. It was made with love. And here they just make it and sell it for money.

MN: Right okay. And you wanted to go back. What about the atmosphere? What was the cross street?

BT: Ocean Avenue?

MN: I go there all the time. I play tennis.

BT: I know where that is. Catlin is busy. Back then it was very busy and a lots of speaking English, Patois and Jamaican and smoking and smelly. And I just wanted to go back home.

KZ: Yes Cote d'Ivoire was nicer at the time.

BT: It was cold and I was like I cannot stay here and my uncle was like you have to stay. And I said why? Because you don't have your passport and ticket. And I said I'll go.

MN: I guess the family wanted to keep you from going back. What was your college like?

BT: I wanted to go to NYU, but my uncle was like—because I did the placement test and my score was high and they said NYU, Columbia or Fordham. It was Fordham University. When I went to NYU she said \$20,000. (inaudible)

MN: It was very expensive

BT: Yes he said your school was free back home you have to pay 20, 000 dollars for. So I went to York because of the discount.

MN: Right relative-family discount. Did you have any good teachers there?

BT: Yes my math teacher was Chinese. He was good. And my music teacher and French teacher because he let me sign in and go back out.

MN: How long before was it you started to do music in New York?

BT: When I found out there was no parties in New York City. When I found out- no African parties. I think back home on Dec 24th and if you don't have no clothes or girlfriend- it was like prom. So when I came here Dec 24th there was no parties and I was crying.

MN: And this was like in the 90s?

BT: I came in 96

KZ: No African parties.

MN: Okay now that's also sort of kind of rough in New York in 96 because the crack epidemic was just passing. It was very rough in the early 90s and late 80s. Even rougher when then when you came but it was still even rough. In that part in Brooklyn which I knew well. So there was no parties, was there a lot of Africans?

BT: Yes. There were a lot of Africans but no parties.

MN: So a light went off and said a lot of Africans, no parties I can do this.

BT: No it was like I didn't know how it works and my birthday is September to December Im thinking how can I do this? Because I didn't know the rules the works I didn't have a lot of friends. But I said I have to do my birthday party and find a place and make a ten.

KZ: A ten is promoter who has been here for years.

MN: So is he a music promoter?

KZ: A party promoter.

MN: A party promoter- so he was actually from parties that you didn't know about and you met him in Brooklyn?

BT: I met him in Manhattan. There was an African restaurant on 6th avenue and 23rd. And I met him and spoke and he said there's a party but its no good. But it can be a birthday party there so my thing was when I met somebody I used to write their phone number down and I from December to September had 200 phone numbers so 250 or 225 so I wanted to play.

MN: So these are Africans?

BT: So it was mostly (inaudible) and Senegalese.

KZ: Where did you meet them?

BT: College-school.

MN: There were some in your college?

BT: Right and in the train I used to see them-the thing is when you see an African you know.

MN: Okay but heres the thing its harder for apparently the Ghanaians that is one of the reasons they use Twi but the Jamaicans all up on Ghanaians because they are all Akan so they go to the same at the Twi and if someone answers you don't go are you Ghanaian you say the same to find out.

BT: No the thing is it was the language. Africa is so different from like city to city within the same country so you feel more comfortable speaking to a French speaking African.

MN: So you see someone African speaking French—

BT: you can tell

KZ: you can tell by the clothes and the complexion

BT: complexion because theres some clothes they wear like if I see someone from Algeria or Morocco I can tell the difference

KZ: Like Latino

MN: New York you can tell.

KZ: Like for me I came from Paris so I already was into fashion so of course I would be okay here but if I came from Algeria then you might.

MN: So most of your African contacts were from French were from the Franco you know like Senegal or what about Mali?

BT: Togo.

MN: Guinea.

KZ: So you created a mailing list?

BT: I was starting the trend, you from Africa? Yeah where you from?

MN: And was this in French mostly or?

BT: yeah French because my thing when we was in school I would do the thing in mass so I didn't care about French or English so my English was very limited to Good morning to how you doing that's it. So I was putting people's number down I said I'll call you and do that and I went to that club Ten told me. And I told him I wanna make a party and he asked how many people you wanna invite? I said 200. He said you don't have 200 people I said yes I do. He said if you can bring 200 people I will let you do your party every Saturdays. So I said can you write it out? One thing I say is don't trust American people. The (inaudible) of his clothes he from Trinidad so I told him right up. So I said bring 200 people then I will do party every Saturday night- come on so he signed and I call all my

contact list and we call them and made them call their friends and that night we had like 330 people.

MN: All from Franco African countries?

BT: no and from Kenya too and (inaudible)

MN: Now do you have your own turntables at this time?

BT: No (inaudible) was DJing

MN: So you were the promoter and Bayto was the DJ?

BT: yes I play when he was busy and he had his own turn tables

MN: But you can use them?

BT: yeah. He gave me turn table

MN: Did you have a collection of music?

BT: I came to New York with maybe like 200 CDs.

MN: Right and a lot of it was Zoujoulu or?

BT: No it was Zoujoulu some Zuke

MN: Zuke is from French West Indies that from Haiti

ZK: from island and Portugese speaking countries

MN: So Zuke was more Caribbean.

BT: Our group was very open

MN: So Zuke was very popular to Ivory Coast, what else did you bring?

(crossover)

MN: You didn't bring Afro Beat?

BT: We didn't have Afro Beat back home we are a party country.

KZ: Yes Ivory Coast has a community of big dancers. So we like everything modern and everything rhythm.

MN: It'd be interesting to see the difference. Yeah Afro beat is more funk- is this more?

BT: Its more funk.

MN: So your music is more party music. There isn't political? Pure political music. Okay so thats very interesting.

KZ: So you get your party every Saturday for 7 years.

MN: Wow at this restaurant.

BT: It was a club, two fellows we did it downstairs and upstairs would be—crazy ideas so we had African downstairs and upstairs we used to have different parties like one was called BBW- it was Big Beautiful Women. Say it was heavy people.

MN: So it was like a lot of Big women.

BT: So it was like every people. You have to be 250 or more.

KZ: So there was one concept there and the African party downstairs.

MN: The floor didn't break?

BT: No but we made sure double stuff. We too had Asian party like from NYU. I used to take classes at NYU so I met this Chinese man who do parties so I told him we should do African party downstairs and Chinese party upstairs. So we get to do that too. (inaudible)

MN: Indian? Oh!

BT: The thing is people like what is mixed. They start upstairs upstairs and come downstairs. I also used to do BET parties on Fridays.

KZ: Were you a promoter or a DJ at that time?

BT: I was a promoter and the concepter.

KZ: Of DJing? Right.

BT: Yes I was taken at different parties.

MN: Now did you have a day job at the time?

BT: I used to be a personal shopper at List Clayboard.

MN: A personal shopper at List Clayboard?

BT: Yes I used to go to school do a party and personal shopper.

MN: And who would you do personal shopping for?

BT: Rich people who cant get up to do shopping.

MN: Was this mostly women or men too?

BT: Both.

MN: Both? Did you advertise as personal shopper?

BT: No. See, I got to bet I used to work at this restaurant. Some used guys to come and I said why are you wearing those clothes? They don't match. I didn't know that. I said Go home and look at mirror. And he said I could put together some clothes I make for him, I'll work for him. I said if you pay me more money than here, than no problem.

MN: SO you were his personally shopper and you were referred to other people?

BT: At Clayboard.

MN: Now was this Clayboard a store?

BT: A store. It was on 52nd and 5th Ave.

MN: Jesus. I a lot of people said I need a personal shopper.

BT: But it was fun because they sent the picture and the size and I pick clothes.

KZ: Because Africans usually have style.

BT: Right. I did makeover for Ricki Lake and Sally Jasey Raphael.

MN: A makeover involves hair up and style?

BT: Just the clothes. Just people who cannot dress and they send me like 10 pictures and I find.

MN: And you have to pick out for them from photos? So that's parties and how did you get into banking?

BT: The president for Bank, next door Liz Clairbourne came to find some stuff and I said your style don't match your clothes. She said why not? I explained to her and she bring the VP of that bank at Liz Clairbourn and they gave me an interview for that job and he asked me to do your go to college. I said yes, he said what are you studying? I said math. He said you wanna be a banker? I told him if you can pay me more than I make then yeah.

MN: If he pay you more than I make?

BT: My uncle told me if someone give you more than you make you live. He said don't make a job your family because they cant replace you. SO I told him you cant pay me more. I used to tell them I make more so they don't pay me more.

KZ: Wait a minute so you what type of visa did you have?

BT: Student.

KZ: So how did you?

BT: The bank gave me a adapt right to work.

KZ: So before that you were working cash and then after that ?

BT: No when you go to college they give on student visa after one year they give you working permit so you can renew it in time.

MN: Right so what happened after the club? The club went under?

BT: No Every Saturday Sunday I had college so one day I just decided to stop. For one year people were looking for me because I needed a break. So I mean during school, party and working the only day I used to rest was Sunday.

MN: Right so you were living in Brooklyn?

BT: Yes

MN: And do you still live in Brooklyn?

BT: yes.

MN: Where do you live in now?

BT: Parks Slope.

MN: Oh I'll drive you home, I live in Parks Slope.

KZ: You didn't just do party in that place right?

BT: I did parties in Harlem I did parties in the Bronx, I did parties in Philadelphia and Washington

MN: Now tell me your parties in the Bronx because most Africans I spoke to did parties in Manhattan. What parties did you do in the Bronx?

BT: There was a club called (inaudible) on 138th and 3rd Ave.

(cross over)

MN: Is this place still open?

BT: I think so. It was open. When I stopped partying , every Saturday my goal was to I made sure there was a party going on so I helped and we started (inaudible)

MN: What year was that?

BT: 2003

MN: So these were mostly African parties? Were there any places in the Bronx you went to?

BT: Yes there was a club opened called (inaudible)

MN: Where was that?

BT: It was on 160 something. One year I used to start a party, Yaku so they opened (inaudible)

MN : Now were these Franco Afrik parties?

BT: No my parties were mixed. It was everybody.

MN: Everybody? Not just African parties.

BT: Everybody, Chinese.

KZ: What happened to all those African parties in the Bronx.

BT: When you put too many Africans together there is always something and there is always—when money is involved if you don't have strong people it doesn't last.

Cause money- used to be made in the parties but now there is no money made.

MN: was this the recession?

BT: No.

(END SESSION)